

WASHINGTON POST
 NEW YORK TIMES
 WALL STREET JOURNAL 72
 WASHINGTON TIMES
 USA TODAY

DATE 7/15/88

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Hope Seen for Talks Between the Koreas, Though Not Rapidly

SEOUL, South Korea (Reuter)—Overtures by parliamentarians may be inching the two Koreas toward a renewed political dialogue, but analysts caution against hopes of rapid progress.

Leaders of South Korea's main parties agreed Friday to accept a North Korean proposal for talks aimed at reducing tensions on the divided peninsula, promising a formal answer in the next few days.

The news sparked the biggest stock market rise in Seoul this year, but diplomatic and political analysts reserved judgment.

"Even if both sides are sincere about holding talks, it will still at best take a lot of time and effort," one Seoul-based diplomat said. "I don't expect anything concrete until after the Seoul Olympics," scheduled to end Oct. 2.

The opposition-controlled National Assembly had just received a response of sorts to a July 1 letter urging North Korea to abandon its boycott and send athletes to the Games, which are to open Sept. 17. This was to be a first step toward eventual national reconciliation.

The North Korean message, given Thursday at the border village of Panmunjom, sidestepped the Olympics invitation. Instead, it called for parliamentarians from both sides to meet before the Games and discuss a nonaggression pact.

In the oblique world of inter-Korean relations, this didn't seem to faze Seoul at all.

While various party leaders gave a qualified welcome to the offer, the government, following up President Roh Tae Woo's July 7 offer of better relations with Pyongyang, let it be known it favored re-opening dialogue.

"It is up to the National Assembly to decide, but we think it is desirable to act positively and accept the proposal in view of the international conditions," Unification Minister Lee Hong Koo told parliament.

Mr. Lee expressed reservations on only one item in Pyongyang's seven-point draft nonaggression pact.

He said careful study must be given to

a section calling for "phased and drastic reduction of armed forces" on both sides, and simultaneous measures to arrange the "stage-by-stage withdrawal of foreign forces and nuclear weapons present in the Korean peninsula."

About 41,000 U.S. soldiers are based in South Korea under a defense treaty. Both Washington and Seoul decline to confirm or deny whether nuclear arms are deployed in South Korea.

If political talks were to resume, the contacts would be the first between the two sides since late 1985. North Korea banned further parliamentary, trade and Red Cross discussions the following year, to protest joint maneuvers staged by U.S. and South Korean forces.

Diplomatic and political analysts said North Korea's apparent willingness to engage in dialogue stemmed from its need to save face following Mr. Roh's offer to end decades of confrontation and open the border to human exchanges.

"North Korea really is unsure what to make of the Roh initiative, which caught it rather off balance," one Pacific Rim diplomat said. "Despite its initial rejection, there is an element of uncertainty."

Pyongyang couldn't legitimize the Seoul government by dealing directly with it, he added. But dealing with an opposition-controlled legislature—Mr. Roh's party lost its majority in the April elections—made contacts thinkable.

Though the Seoul party leaders signaled basic acceptance of parliamentary talks, notes of caution were quickly sounded in official circles here.

The Yonhap news agency quoted a senior government official as saying Seoul would seek preliminary discussions, rather than an immediate parliamentary conference, to decide procedural matters.

The unidentified official said Pyongyang also had sent a letter to the U.S. Congress, adding that he believed North Korea could be trying to revive its old idea of a tripartite conference, including the U.S., on the peninsula's future.

North Korea wants to negotiate directly with Washington on the pullout of U.S. forces and weaponry from South Korea, while Seoul insists it alone will talk to Pyongyang.

The tone of its letter, dispatched Thursday, suggested that North Korea, with its hopes of co-hosting the Olympics dashed, now was determined not to attend the event in Seoul.

The Games' chief organizer, Park Seh Jik, told foreign reporters Friday that even at this late hour, Seoul hoped Pyongyang would respond to its invitation and send athletes to the Games.